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ABSTRACT

Television includes a substantial amount of sexual content, and TV's sexual messages are clearly an important part of adolescent sexual socialization. At a time when the nation is facing a sexual health crisis among young people, special attention needs to be paid to those media depictions that could influence how young people develop their attitudes and beliefs about sex. A study examined the amount and nature of sexual messages on television today. Because "how" sex is shown on TV is as important as "how often" sex is shown, the study did not just count the number of sexual situations, but rather looked as well at the context in which sex is presented on television. Television programming of all genres (except sports, newscasts, and children's TV) was sampled during one week using content analysis techniques to measure and assess these messages, a total of 1351 programs across 10 channels were analyzed. Key findings are: of all shows with sexual content, just 9% include any mention of the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, or any reference to contraception, or safer sex; more than half (56%) of all shows contain sexual content; more than two-thirds (67%) of 11 network prime time shows contain either talk about sex or sexual behavior; among all genres of television programming studied, more than half of shows contain sexual content; and of those instances of sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied, 73% were among adults over 25, 23% were among young adults ages 19-24, and 3% were among teens. (NKA)

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A Biennial Report to the Kaiser Family Foundation 1999

SEX ON TV

Executive Summary

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KAISER FAMILY

Introduction:

Discussion and debate about the impact of television programming on young people has focused mainly on violent content. Yet television also includes a substantial amount of sexual content, and TV's sexual messages are clearly an important part of adolescent sexual socialization. At a time when we are facing a sexual health crisis among young people —with nearly a million teen pregnancies and more than three million instances of sexually-transmitted diseases among teenagers every year— we need to pay special attention to those media depictions that could influence how young people develop their attitudes and beliefs about sex.

The purpose of this study is to examine the amount and nature of sexual messages on television today. Because *how* sex is shown on TV is as important as *how often* sex is shown, the study is not limited to counting the number of sexual situations, but rather looks as well at the context in which sex is presented on television. The findings presented here are based on a representative one week sample of all genres of television programming other than sports, news casts, and children's TV. Using content analysis techniques to measure and assess these messages, a total of 1351 programs across ten channels were analyzed, offering the most elaborate evaluation of sexual messages on television yet produced by research.

KEY FINDINGS:

Of all shows with sexual content, **just 9%** include any mention of the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, or any reference to contraception, protection, or safer sex.

These findings are a broad indicator of how often television incorporates safer sex messages into sexual content. However, there are important differences in how shows address these themes. For example, a talk show could spend an hour on a highly charged sexual topic, and then include a passing reference to condoms. Half of all references to sexual risks or responsibilities in this study were minor or inconsequential.

On the other side of the equation, some shows feature issues about sexual health or sexual decision-making as one of the primary storylines of an entire episode. For example, an episode of Chicago Hope centered on a young girl who had just learned she was HIV-positive. However, this type o show was the exception rather than the rule. Just one percent of all shows with sexual content had a primary emphasis throughout the show on issue concerning sexual risks or responsibilities.

Likewise, not all sexual content is significant enough to warrant references to subjects such as waiting to have sex, or practicing safer sex. These topics would seem to be most appropriate in programs that show couples in bed, either strongly implying or actual showing them engaged in sex. However, none of the 88 scenes that contained sexual intercourse — either depicted or strongly implied — included even a passing reference to sexual risks or responsibilities. In scenes like these, even a brief reference — a condom on a bedside table, or a question about protection — could go a long way toward normalizing safer sex behaviors.

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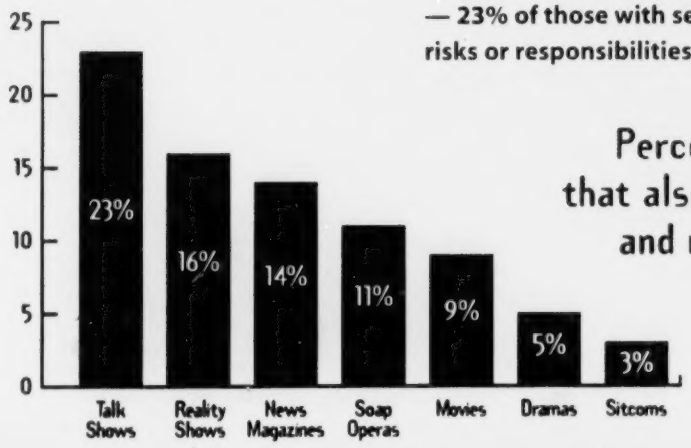
Looking at this issue by genre, talk shows were the genre that included messages about sexual risks or responsibilities most often, featuring such issues 23% of the time they mentioned sex; of fictional TV shows, soap operas addressed these topics 11% of the time they included sex, dramas did so 5% of the time and sitcoms 3% of the time.

Dramas broadcast on the major networks during prime-time included such messages nearly one out of every four times they included sexual content — 23% of those with sexual content included at least some mention of the risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.



Percent of shows with sexual content that also contain references to the risks and responsibilities of sex, by genre...

Examples: References to sexual risks and responsibilities.

Reference to condoms:

Charlie and Nina are two young adults who have established a dating relationship. Nina is helping Charlie clean out the storeroom of his restaurant, which is closed for major renovation. As Charlie reminisces about "old times" at the restaurant, a construction worker closes the storeroom door, apparently not realizing they are inside. Charlie wonders aloud if they are locked in, and says he can holler to the workers outside should they be trapped. Nina, however, seems to like the situation. "What if we were trapped?" she asks as she begins to caress and kiss him long and passionately. Responding to her signals, Charlie stammers out a concern. "Great ... but what about ... because I don't actually carry one," implying that intercourse is out of the question without some protection. "I do, since our third date," Nina promptly replies, pulling a condom out of her pocket. With that, the two engage in a passionate kiss as the scene fades to black. (Party of Five, Fox)

Reference to HIV/AIDS:

Featured throughout this episode is Ivy, a 15 year-old who first goes to see a doctor because she thinks she might be pregnant. In a brief misunderstanding, Dr. Grad tells Ivy, "Your test is positive." The teenager panics because she does not want to have a baby. But the doctor quickly clarifies that Ivy is positive not for pregnancy but rather for HIV. From that moment on, Ivy appears quite relieved. She does not take the situation seriously, skipping her medicine and missing scheduled check-ups at the hospital. When Dr. Grad first confronts her, Ivy lies, covering up the fact that she has not told her boyfriend or her parents that she has contracted the HIV virus. Eventually, Dr. Grad forces Ivy to face her situation. In an emotional scene at the end of the program, Ivy tearfully recounts the repercussions of her sexual activity. Her pills make her tired and sick. The boyfriend she thought would marry her has left. She cries, "Who's going to date me now, let alone marry me?" Dr. Grad embraces Ivy and tries to comfort her, but the grim negative consequences of unprotected sex have no easy solution in this case.
(Chicago Hope, CBS)

KEY FINDINGS:

More than half (56%) of all shows contain sexual content; these shows average more than three scenes with sex per hour.

Fifty-four percent of all shows contain talk about sex, and 23% of all shows contain depictions of sexual behavior. Seven percent of all shows contain scenes in which sexual intercourse is either depicted or strongly implied.

Of those shows containing sexual behavior, the most common act shown was passionate kissing (50%), followed by physical flirting (26%), scenes in which intercourse is strongly implied (12%), intimate touching (7%) and depiction of intercourse (3%).

In the one-week sample analyzed for this study, there were 71 scenes in which intercourse was strongly implied, and 17 scenes in which intercourse was actually depicted, albeit discreetly.

Examples: Types of sexual content

Passionate kissing:

Mike and Kim meet at a bar. They talk about life and relationships and Kim comments about the importance of taking time to build a relationship. The scene shifts abruptly from the middle of their conversation in the bar to a living room couch where the two are frantically groping and kissing one another repeatedly as they tear their clothes off. In between kisses, Kim asserts, "I don't normally do this... I like to wait for a more meaningful relationship..." Mike agrees with everything she says, all the while focusing on undressing her. As he begins to undo her bra, a beeper goes off and he remarks jokingly, "I didn't know bras came with alarms." The encounter comes to an end because of some urgent interruption. (Almost Perfect, Lifetime)

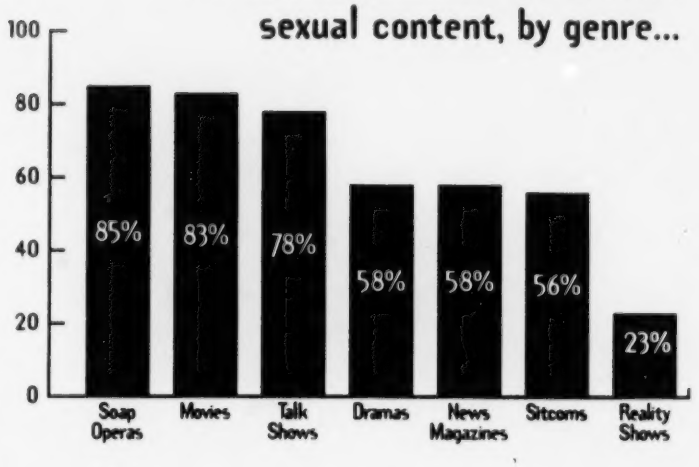
Intimate touching:

A scene opens with the camera moving slowly along a row of cars in a parking lot, finally stopping at the last one which is rocking slowly and has fogged windows. Inside the car are Dennis, a cheating husband, and Gail, his attractive insurance agent. As the camera's view enters the car, the couple is locked in a steamy embrace. Between kisses, they both moan in passionate ecstasy. The bra-clad Gail writhes on top of Dennis, who holds her and a bottle of almost-empty scotch in one hand. As Gail strokes her hand along his khaki-clad thigh, Dennis reaches his free hand around her and begins working it under her skirt. Visibly aroused, Gail suggests they take their sexual activities "to somewhere that has a bigger play area" and they decide to head for a hotel. (Silk Stalkings, USA Network)

More than two-thirds (67%) of all network prime-time shows contain either talk about sex or sexual behavior, averaging more than five scenes with sex per hour.

Among almost all genres of television programming studied, more than half of shows contain sexual content.

Percent of shows that contain sexual content, by genre...



Only the genre labeled "reality" contained sexual themes in less than half its shows, including such content in about one of every four programs (23%).

Sexual intercourse implied:

A man and a woman are in an office. They kiss and the woman breaks away to go lock the door. She goes to the desk, moves a chair out of the way, and sweeps some papers off the desk top. The couple begins kissing and disrobing as she leans on the edge of the desk. The scene breaks, and when it picks up again the couple are putting their clothes back on.
(The Young and The Restless, CBS)

Sexual intercourse depicted:

Ally makes an urgent after-hours call to the head of her law firm, Richard. The scene shifts to his bedroom where the phone is ringing. Richard is in bed with Whipper, a judge with whom he has an ongoing relationship. The two are engaged in a flurry of frantic, conjoined movement, literally bouncing around the bed as the phone rings. Whipper reaches to the nightstand and answers the phone without disengaging the sex act. Ally is surprised to recognize Whipper's voice and to hear Richard's moaning in the background. Ally asks for Richard, but Whipper says "He's a little busy right now. Could I ask him to call you back?" Ally hangs up with a disgusted look on her face, while Richard and Whipper continue their sexual escapade.
(Ally McBeal, Fox)

Examples: Types of sexual content continued on page 6

KEY FINDINGS:

Of those instances of sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied:

Nearly three-quarters (73%) were among adults over 25, 23% were among young adults ages 18-24, and 3% were among teens

Half (53%) occurred among couples who had an established relationship with one another; 28% were among couples who knew each other but did not appear to have an established relationship; and 10% occurred between couples who had just met.

Eight percent of all shows included sexual content featuring teens.

Most of the scenes involving teens and sex (83%) were limited to talk about sex, while 17% included sexual behavior, most frequently kissing. Eighteen percent of all shows featuring teenage sexual content also included some reference to the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity.

Relationship of characters engaged in sexual intercourse, depicted or strongly implied, on TV...

Examples: Types of sexual content

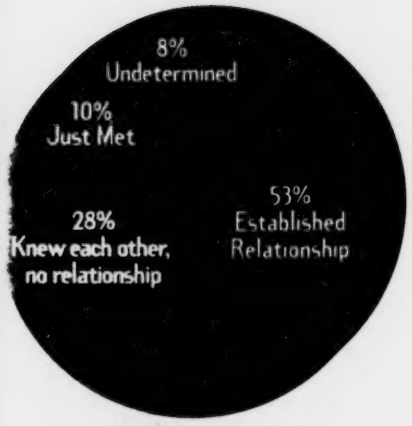
continued from page 5

Talk about sex:

After attending a class on sexual harassment, the office workers grow paranoid about a new "no tolerance" policy. Matt is frustrated because he has romantic interests for Jana, one of the women in his office. In front of the entire staff, he loudly declares his affection for her. "I like you. I like you a lot and it's okay if you like me too." She replies earnestly, "I just want to sleep with you!" Matt encourages the other staff members to express their true sexual feelings. Jana invites Matt for an apparent tryst, asking "Do you want to go to the edit room?" He responds eagerly and they scurry off holding hands. Another man asks the girl standing next to him, "Supply closet?" She nods and he wraps his arm around her, leading the way.
(Working, NBC)

Physical flirting:

Nina is working alone in her high-rise office, talking on the phone while pulling up her nylons. She swivels in her chair and discovers a young male window washer is outside just inches away from where she is sitting. She gasps with shock and embarrassment, then tells the person on the phone what is happening. Luckily, the man seems not to notice her. Still explaining the situation on the phone, she starts to sound lustful and remarks that the man is "pretty cute." Nina turns to the window and coos "Hello Mr. Clean. I have been a very dirty girl," while blowing him a kiss. He winks at her and the tone escalates with more non-verbal come-ons between the two. When the man starts to unzip his pants, Nina storms to the door in seeming disgust, but surprisingly closes the door and locks it. She walks seductively back to the window and says, "See how you like this, naughty boy." Nina unzips the front of her tight black dress, revealing her black bra, and jumps in front of the window flashing her body. The window washer is so stunned that he loses his balance and falls off of his platform.
(Just Shoot Me, NBC)



Based on the composite week sample of programs (all programs except newscasts, sports or children's programs).

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Methodology:

The study analyzes 1351 shows, covering the full range of TV genres other than newscasts and sports events. The sample includes 942 shows from a composite week of programming across ten channels, as well as 228 children's shows also from a composite week and 181 prime time broadcast network shows from a two-week over-sample. The composite week sample was drawn from randomly selected programs broadcast between October 1997 and March 1998. The main analyses in this study are based on the shows in the composite week sample. The prime-time analyses are based on the 181 broadcast network shows from the two-week over-sample, combined with the 93 network prime-time shows included in the composite week sample. Children's programs were analyzed independently of shows created for a general audience.

The ten channels in the study represent all segments of the television industry including broadcast network, independent broadcast, public broadcasting, basic cable, and premium cable. The channels studied are ABC, CBS, Fox, HBO, Lifetime, NBC, TNT, PBS, and USA, and the independent station KTLA in Los Angeles.

For purposes of this study, sexual content includes both talk about sex and depictions of sexual behavior. Sexual behavior includes depictions of sexual intercourse, scenes in which sexual intercourse is strongly implied (for example, a couple are kissing passionately and undressing each other by the bed, the show fades to black and comes up in the morning on the couple naked under the sheets), intimate touching (for example, a man running his hands over a woman's breasts or thighs), passionate kissing, and physical flirting (for example, a woman seductively undressing for a man). Only those scenes in which the sexual behavior was a substantial or primary emphasis of the scene were included in the study; any scenes in which there was sexual behavior but the emphasis on sex was minor or inconsequential were not included in the counts of sexual content.

For every show containing sexual content, the type of talk or behavior was categorized, the number of scenes featuring such content were counted, and the degree of focus on sex was measured. For shows featuring sexual behavior, the degree of explicitness was also assessed.

All scenes and shows containing sexual content were analyzed for any mention of any issues concerning the possible risks or responsibilities of sexual activity, including any references to contraception, condoms, safer sex, sexually-transmitted diseases, pregnancy, abortion, abstinence or the possibility of waiting to have sex. All shows with sexual content were also examined to determine whether the full program contained a primary emphasis on any of these issues. Any show that contained sexual intercourse either depicted or strongly implied was analyzed for the presence of either positive or negative messages regarding the consequences of sex, and for such contextual factors as the relationship of the partners and the age of the participants.

All analysis was conducted by a group of trained coders whose performance was systematically monitored to ensure strong inter-coder reliability.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation

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